

LOOKING FOR NATIVE GROUND

Contemporary Appalachian Poetry

Rita Sims Quillen

Looking for Native Ground



The Appalachian Consortium Press

The Appalachian Consortium is a non-profit educational organization comprised of institutions and agencies located in the Southern Highlands. Our members are volunteers who plan and execute projects which serve 156 mountain counties in seven states. Among our goals are:

- *Preserving the cultural heritage of Southern Appalachia*
- *Protecting the mountain environment*
- *Improving the educational opportunities for area students and teachers*
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by
Rita Sims Quillen

Appalachian Consortium Press
Boone, North Carolina 28608



The Appalachian Consortium was a non-profit educational organization composed of institutions and agencies located in Southern Appalachia. From 1973 to 2004, its members published pioneering works in Appalachian studies documenting the history and cultural heritage of the region. The Appalachian Consortium Press was the first publisher devoted solely to the region and many of the works it published remain seminal in the field to this day.

With funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities through the Humanities Open Book Program, Appalachian State University has published new paperback and open access digital editions of works from the Appalachian Consortium Press.

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ISBN (pbk.: alk. Paper): 978-1-4696-3846-1
ISBN (ebook): 978-1-4696-3848-5

Distributed by the University of North Carolina Press
www.uncpress.org

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Jim Wayne Miller, Fred Chappell, Jeff Daniel Marion, and Robert Morgan for permission to reprint selections from their poetry and excerpts from their personal correspondence. Thanks are also due to Louisiana State University Press for permission to reprint selections from Fred Chappell's *The World Between the Eyes* and *Midquest*; to Jonathan Greene at Gnomon Press for permission to reprint selections from Robert Morgan's *Groundwork*; to Wesleyan University Press for permission to reprint selections from Robert Morgan's *At the Edge of the Orchard Country* (©1987 by Robert Morgan); to *Appalachian Journal* for their permission to reprint excerpts from essays by Dan Leidig and Fred Chappell first published in their pages; and to J. G. Ferguson Publishing Company for permission to reprint excerpts from Carl Jung's *Man and His Symbols* (©1964 J. G. Ferguson Publishing Company.) Finally, thanks to George Ella Lyon for allowing use of excerpts from her personal correspondence.

This project has been supported in part by a grant from the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services at East Tennessee State University.

Dedicated

To my patient and loving family,

Mac,

Kelsey and Teague

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Acknowledgments

This book took six years and the efforts of many individuals and institutions. First of all, I want to thank Fred Chappell, Jeff Daniel Marion, Jim Wayne Miller, and Robert Morgan for writing the poems and for patiently answering my questions. Richard Blaustein at the Center for Appalachian Studies and Services at East Tennessee State University provided financial support. Roberta Herrin of the Appalachian Consortium Publications Committee offered constant moral support and many helpful recommendations along the way. Also at East Tennessee State University, my graduate committee was a constant source of ideas and enthusiasm. Dr. Anne LeCroy, Dr. Don Johnson, and finally, the man who continues to inspire me, Dr. Jack Higgs, were always ready to help. Dr. Styron Harris also read and commented on the manuscript. Exchanging letters and drafts of the manuscript with George Ella Lyon helped reshape the manuscript in some ways, and I can't thank her enough for her clear thinking and kind advice. At Tri-Cities State Technical Institute, my friend, Fay Garner, did an outstanding job of preparing the final manuscript and Vicki Houser, everybody's favorite English teacher, helped with proofreading. Leland Cooper, Jane Shook, and Barry Buxton at the Appalachian Consortium helped in more ways than I have time to name. And finally, I thank my husband, Mac, and my children, Kelsey and Teague, for their love and patience. Thanks to the grandparents and my sister, Greta, for babysitting. Thanks to everybody for believing.

Introduction

I believe the natural scenery which will be found, on the whole, productive of most literary intellect is that mingled of hill and plain, . . . The men who are formed by the schools and polished by the society of the capital may yet in many ways have their powers shortened by the absence of natural scenery, and the mountaineer, neglected, ignorant, and unambitious may have been taught things by the clouds and streams which he could not have learned in a college, or coterie.
(Ruskin 169-70)

As middle-class America has infused the Appalachian region, the native mountain people have found themselves caught in a cultural time warp that may be unparalleled in our history. The rural life, with its unique values, dialect, and institutions, is being replaced by, or at least heavily mixed with, a mainstream society. The politicians and businessmen of the area laud this as progress, and, of course, the standard of living and education have improved in the region. But the people of the mountains—old and young, educated and illiterate, farmers and teachers—have mixed feelings about this “progress.”

In response to this undercurrent of anxiety, area writers, particularly the poets, have sought to describe and explain the evolution that is taking place within the culture. P. J. Laska has written:

In the work of Appalachian poets with roots here the very conception of art seems different, not just because it is more political or more critical or more didactic, but because it seeks to break down the wall that separates literature from life. It is art that seeks to be involved in the life of the people and tries to do this at a time when there is very little poetry being written which connects itself to the world of people and their history, their struggles, and their work . . . Our poets are therefore out of tune with most of what goes on in the national poetry network, and are by choice, I think, closer to a regional folk conception of art. (193-96)

Four of the region’s respected poets, Fred Chappell, Jeff Daniel Marion, Jim Wayne Miller, and Robert Morgan, are primarily folk artists,

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by Laska's definition, and give an account of a particular people. The recurring images in their poetry are of everyday, common events: tending the land, hunting and fishing, watching children, visiting friends and family, growing old. There is also in this poetry a very strong sense of place; events are occurring in a place easily identified by its sights, sounds, and people.

The biographies of Chappell, Marion, Miller, and Morgan contain strong similarities. Each is a native of the Appalachian region and comes from an agrarian community that he left behind in order to enter the academic world. They are all now middle-aged husbands and fathers re-examining themselves, their families, and their world as many people do in mid-life. They share a sense of loss and need for solace in their remembering. Their pain becomes ours, and their story is the story of almost everyone in Appalachia whose family has been here for generations. All four poets are at the forefront of a regional literary movement that has arisen in Appalachia in response to the area's rapid growth and change in the last generation.

Jim Wayne Miller has noted in his introductions to both Jesse Stuart's *Songs of a Mountain Plowman* and James Still's *The Wolfpen Poems* that today's younger Appalachian writers owe a tremendous debt to both these Kentucky poets. Their identification with the earth and its seasons, with the rhythms of mountain life, the careful attention to nature and its possibility for metaphor, continue in Chappell, Marion, Miller, and Morgan. Still and Stuart provide a bridge from past to present.

While they were students at Vanderbilt University, both Jesse Stuart and James Still were advised by their teacher, Fugitive poet¹ Donald Davidson, to write about home and its people. Both did just that, creating an impressive body of poetry and fiction about southern Appalachia by two talented native sons. Their writing shows that both men knew the source and strength of their vision—the place itself. Jesse Stuart wrote, "It is my land and I am part of it / I think I'm clay from the heart of it" (267). And in the poem "River of Earth," also the title of his famous novel, Still refers to those who have "struck pages with the large print of knowledge, / The thing laid open, the hills translated" (21).

Jim Wayne Miller notes that Jesse Stuart's "Great Thought"—that nature renewed itself season after season while man only "cycled" once—

is repeated throughout his work both as metaphor and organizing principle (Introduction vii). Contemplation of the mountains' sharply defined seasons continues to be a fruitful effort for contemporary poets, particularly Robert Morgan and Jeff Daniel Marion, as later chapters will show.

The younger writers' debt to Still is more complex. As Miller has pointed out in his introduction to *The Wolfpen Poems*, James Still refused to participate in the either-or literature about Appalachia that was being published in the 1930s and 40s. He refused to be a dewy-eyed romantic or a political preacher. Miller writes: "As a consequence, Still's poems discover not just a landscape of beauty and wild freedom, and not just visual blight and exploitation, and hard, unremitting conditions" (Introduction xix). The same statement could be applied to Jesse Stuart, though Stuart definitely leans to the romantic side on occasion. Both Still and Stuart were influenced by the realistic writing of the early 20th century and by people like Donald Davidson who advocated using regional materials. They are precursors of Miller, Marion, Morgan, and Chappell in their eye for home truths and their willingness to "tell it like it is."

With the exception of Miller, who occasionally takes an unapologetic turn in the pulpit, these four contemporary poets shy away from blatantly political poetry. Their work avoids political or ideological rhetoric on the region's history, future, or problems. Their approach more closely fits Allen Tate's idea of traditional writing, first defined by him over fifty years ago:

To write traditionally is not to use local color or one's past; it is the assumption that people up to a certain point will behave in a manner to which one is accustomed and that one's grasp on human emotions and actions is in the end the only possible grasp. To write traditionally is to approach the chosen subject matter with an instinct for its meaning, rather than a theory. . . . A self-conscious regionalism destroys tradition with its perpetual discovery of it. And regionalism . . . when it merges with sectionalism is death to literature. Sectionalism is politics; it is aggressive and abstract, and has as its true sphere a field of action which is hostile to art. (*Regionalism* 159-60)

It could be said that ultimately everything is political. In this case,

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the sense of self, the awareness and pride, that makes one write good regional poetry is a political force, as well as an artistic one. But all four of these poets know that overtly political or “preachy” poetry is rarely good poetry. So they inform us, mold our opinions, refine our sensibilities and lift our spirits with talk of muddy fields, ice-blue mason jars, huckleberries, and the folks down the road. As Kentucky poet and critic George Ella Lyon has observed:

If, as Laska says, Appalachian poets break down “the wall that separates literature from life,” don’t they also break down the categories that separate political from pastoral (which is a sort of life/art distinction in itself) . . . Isn’t it political to think the stove is important, to think Matilda and her dipper worthy of contemplation? . . . Isn’t it a political statement to “break down the wall that separates literature from life?” I think it is. (Correspondence)

Guy Owen, writing in a review of Jeff Daniel Marion’s *Out in the Country, Back Home* for *Southern Poetry Review*, talks about the “Neo-pastoral poetry” movement, saying:

Of course, the pastoral has always been with us in the simplistic nature poems and rhymed effusions of poetry societies. But these are a different variety of “pasture poets.” Their view of rural life is no more romantic than Agee’s in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and many of their poems are as bleak and painful as Walker Evans’ haunting photographs. (64-65)

The best approach to this contemporary poetry is to avoid pastoral vs. political labels. Far more useful is Laska’s “folk artist” conception. The most eloquent definition of the term thus far was published by Fred Chappell, who maintains that there are basically two types of writers: the folk artist and the “writers of the arabesque” (*Two Modes* 337).

“Folk Artist” is a derisive term, says Chappell. Yet, there are a great many writers from every city and country, from every walk of life, who are labeled folk artists: Chekhov, Flannery O’Connor, Faulkner, Melville, Welty, Frank O’Connor, Mark Twain, Thoreau, and others. Chappell explains how he distinguishes between the folk and arabesque writer:

. . . Writers of the arabesque . . . may be distinguished from folk

writers in that their work is less concerned with delivering basic narrative materials than with manipulating these materials in an idiosyncratic manner. All art is, of course, treatment, but the arabesque artist will insist upon what we might call a “post-treatment;” after a satisfactory narrative outline is determined he then manipulates the elements so that his train of narrative becomes of secondary importance and may, in fact, disappear almost entirely. . . He speaks to an audience for whom style is a mild intoxication. (337-38)

Then Chappell defines the folk artist—the opposite of the arabesque writer—and discusses the merits of the folk artist’s obviousness.

What the writers point out is the fact that in a true presentation of the obvious, the particularities of life retain their stubbornness and independence, do not become quirks, justifications, or mannerisms of an isolated psyche . . . (The folk artist) does not see his reader as available to his thought if he does not situate him fairly comfortably in recognizable appearance.

. . . His use of appearance is for the reader to look *through*, not at. (337-38)

Chappell, Marion, Miller, and Morgan are very different writers, each with his own unique style and approach, but all four can comfortably share the identification of “folk artist.” As subsequent chapters will show, there is a pattern of growth and development common in the work of each poet. Beginning with earlier published works and moving to more recent ones, the chapters chronicle each poet’s increase in awareness of memory’s place in the creative imagination, as he acknowledges his debt to his mountain past as a wellspring of inspiration.

Their writing is in contrast to much modern American poetry which is increasingly abstract, obscure, intensely personal, and highly intellectual. Many poets today detach the poem and the reader from any experiential reality. Modern poetry too often becomes a dance of words on a page. But these poets’ motivation for writing includes not only Emerson’s conception of the poet as seer and namer (9-45)—someone who enlarges and transcends ordinary experience—but also a strong cultural and regional experience. They explain their personal experience to themselves and to the rest of the world. They describe a life and a place

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so clearly through particular and narrow details that others can experience them as well. By synthesizing their personal past, present, and imagined future, Chappell, Marion, Miller, and Morgan transcend the region and bring a wider understanding of the mountain culture in a state of flux.

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Jim Wayne Miller

Jim Wayne Miller is recognized as a primary force in the contemporary literary scene, the root of burgeoning Appalachian writing. Through his books of poetry, such as *Dialogue With a Dead Man* and *The Mountains Have Come Closer*, his essays on Appalachia and America, his reviews, and his wide lecturing, Miller has helped define and shape the conception of this new regional awareness.

As a former student of Donald Davidson, one of the original Vanderbilt “Fugitives,” Miller is comfortable going against the tide. He is aware, as Fred Chappell points out, that “folk artist” is a derisive label, yet he embraces it gladly and extols its possibilities for freedom, both in a literary and personal sense. Miller is usually more blunt and forceful in his call for action and awareness than any of the other three poets. For Miller, poetry can be a catalyst for growth and change. Poetry is not simply a response to something: it can be a whole new agenda. Fred Chappell could be describing Miller’s poetry perfectly when he writes of the folk artist, “. . . he is after home truths. . . His use of appearance is for the reader to look through not at” (*Two Modes* 338).

In *Dialogue With a Dead Man*, we look through Jim Wayne Miller’s struggle with grief at the loss of his grandfather. The recurring images in the poems reflect the loss of something precious, of ensuing grief, then healing and rejuvenation. He sees that in the death of this person he has lost a part of himself—a part that was more closely tied to family and home and mountains than he had previously realized.

In the opening section of the book, “Copperhead Cane,” Miller remembers his grandfather and illuminates his feelings about him by focusing each poem on a particular aspect of their life and work together. In still life pictures of rural Appalachia, we see the two hanging tobacco, fox hunting, fishing, making snake canes, mending fences, and cutting timber. Many of the poems consider for the first time the reality of doing these things alone. “Copperhead Cane” (an image for the twisted, ugly nature of grief) deals with the initial stage of grief—the disbelief, the denial, the descent into despair.

Throughout the book, a shadow becomes the dominant image by which Miller conveys the acceptance of death and loss, and rejuvenation. The shadow makes its first appearance in “Hound and Hook” (18), by the lantern lights used for fox hunting and night fishing. The shadow,

identified with the dead man, is still Miller's shadow. The shadow represents a part of his own personality, his own psyche that is struggling to accept this death and survive.

Carl Jung has explained "the realization of the shadow" at great length in his book, *Man and His Symbols* (168-71). The shadow, he says, is a part of the personality that:

[For various reasons,] one has preferred not to look at too closely. . . . The shadow is not the whole of the unconscious personality. It represents unknown or little-known attributes and qualities of the ego—aspects that mostly belong to the personal sphere and that could just as well be conscious... The shadow usually contains values that are needed by our consciousness, but that exist in a form that makes it difficult to integrate them into one's life. (173)

In the middle section, "Dialogue With a Dead Man," the narrator and the shadow begin speaking to each other, talking about their feelings as they go their separate ways. By acknowledging the shadow's presence and establishing a dialogue with him, Miller's narrator begins the painful process on the road to self-healing and spiritual growth. He attempts to integrate the values of the shadow into his consciousness.

The opening poems in the section—"Walking," "Old Ghost," and "Stalking"—detail the awareness of the shadow and its seemingly relentless pursuit of the narrator. Then, finally, there is a "Meeting."

My shadow was my partner in the row.
He was working the slick handled shadow of his hoe
When out of the patch toward noon there came the sound
Of steel on steel two inches underground, (25)

In "Dog's Eye," Miller's shadow has become a constant preoccupation to the speaker. He longs for some words, some comfort, and he asks, "Why have you followed me through this unbroken round of days and nights and never spoken?" (26). The impatient shadow chides Miller's narrator for his self-absorption in his own misery, saying in "Vine,"

I'd just as lief
you left off making pictures of your grief

early and late
and hanging them between me and the light. (28)

The shadow, then, tells Miller's persona that it is time to move beyond grief, to accept the passage of time and let himself come to understand the shadow.

But the speaker in the poems is not ready to listen. He tells us and the shadow that he fears he will not recover. "A Dark Place," "Night Storms," "The Hungry Dead," and "Last Words" are dark, introspective poems. The only dialogue is within the narrator and his conscious, grief-stricken self. But midway through the section, images of life and healing emerge—images of rejuvenation within the heart and spirit. "Berry Picking," "A Mountain Field," and "Thaw" are about springtime and newness. In "Sowing Salt" Miller uses an image of birth, a cow licking her newborn calf: "I am restored ... Mother light licks me dry in a pasture" (49). In the next poem, "Living Forever," a newborn creature thinks it will live forever. Finally, in "Writing my Name," the imagery is of insects metamorphosing: locusts, worms, little larvae. Re-birth has taken place and foreshadows the "born again" idea of Miller's second book, *The Mountains Have Come Closer*.

Miller's persona has finally accepted the loss, and more important, integrated the shadow and acknowledged its message into his consciousness. The shadow has become a friend, as Carl Jung writes:

Whether the shadow becomes our friend or enemy depends largely upon ourselves. . . The shadow is not necessarily always an opponent. In fact, he is exactly like any human being with whom one has to get along, sometimes by giving in, sometimes by resisting, sometimes by giving love,—whatever the situation requires . . . if the shadow figure contains valuable forces, they ought to be assimilated into actual experience and not repressed. (173-75)

The shadow now becomes a vital part of the speaker's personality and he realizes this. In "Last Words," the shadow says,

-Well, neither of us will be at rest
until our separate voices speak as one
and I move with you, black shadow in sun
only as you move. You'd do well to remember,

I lost my hold on life but still crave earth.
To me you stand like green-barked second-growth
Sprung from stumps and treelaps of old timber. (39)

In the final section of the book, “Family Reunion,” Miller transcends grief. He decides that he is and always has been “on native ground,” and death cannot take the memories, feelings or values away. He finds renewal and a sense of security in the gathering of his family. He also sees renewal simply in the physical surroundings, the mountains themselves.

I travel everywhere on native ground;
Roads turning into darkness turn me home . . . (57)

The idea of renewal and self-acceptance is reinforced in the final poem, “Family Re-union.”

. . . living and dead mingle
like sun and shadow under old trees.

For the dead have come too,
those dark, stern departed who pose
all year in oval picture frames.
They are looking out of the eyes of children,
young sprouts
whose laughter blooms
fresh as the new flowers in the graveyard. (78)

There is a strong parallel between Miller’s struggle to accept the loss of his grandfather and the personal struggle experienced by almost every person growing up in the mountains. All moderns who have grown up here and have roots going back several generations begin at some point to feel an estrangement—a sense of loss. There is a desire to hold on to something—it is intangible and it is somehow connected with family. Life forces us to make choices and move on, just as Miller has done. We loosen our grip on the past and look ahead. Adaptation involves both the acceptance of change and loss and a renewal of faith and energy. Miller shows us how to see past and future at the same time, denying neither, yet strongly aware of our footing on native ground.

Miller expands the idea of self-acceptance and spiritual growth in his second book, *The Mountains Have Come Closer*. Part One is entitled “The American Funhouse.” The poems in this section draw from the author’s current situation—the reality of Jim Wayne Miller, poet, professor of German, a middle-aged husband and father. He writes about his children mostly in “Saturday Morning,” “Living With Children,” “A House of Readers,” and “Skydivers.” And he shows some anxiety, though not morbid or humorless, about growing older in “Getting Together,” “If Your Birthday is Today,” and “Fish Story.”

In the poem “Getting Together,” Miller’s persona begins to look back at himself and some old friends, realizing the changes that the years have brought.

Each one of us sees the friend he knew
standing back of the one this friend has become. (*Mountains* 5)

And “Skydivers” depicts feelings of alienation, a sense of being apart from family much like the estrangement among the old friends in “Getting Together.”

When we are quiet in our separate rooms at night,
I think we are all skydivers falling through our
separate spaces . . . (15)

This picture of changing, growing old, and dying ends with the poem “Going South” in which the speaker actually envisions his own death.

Part Two, “You Must Be Born Again,” prepares us for Part Three, “Brier Sermon.” The poems in Part Two center on disenchantment with northern city life or any life, for that matter, that seems rootless. He begins to introduce the character of the Brier and build a certain frame of mind so the reader can later listen to the Brier’s sermon.

In “Turn Your Radio On,” the narrator is trapped in a noisy, sleepless city. He wants always to know where home is—it sustains him somehow. He gets out his shoebox of family photographs. His grandmother and grandfather look like one another and sit in their split-bottom chairs looking “so comfortably in place” (22).

Something about the way they sat spoke to him through
his own thoughts
all the way from the mountains, like a powerful transmitter:
this place
belongs to us, their faces said, and we belong to it.
When it's time, we come out on this porch and take our ease,
and talk as naturally as the frogs in the poplars sing
toward dark. (22)

In “Chopping Wood,” “His Hands,” and “Winter Days,” the speaker thinks of work—hard physical work—and memories of the mountain outdoors as he tries to cope with an alien place. In “Brier Visions,” he looks at his childhood home. Change is moving him and many others away. He finds that he has “settled in a suburb, north of himself” (28). He writes of a place that is changing quickly, becoming unrecognizable.

Like floodwaters rising in the night,
radio waves moved up the mountain valleys.
Coves and hollers rocked with the city's flotsam:
Wrigley's and Lucky Strike, Ford, and Goodyear.
Lifted off the land by a rising music,
trees cut loose by singing saws, the people
rode the receding suck of sung commercials,
floated like rafted logs toward the mainstream. (26)

All of America rushes toward the mainstream; this description could be of Everywhere, USA. For the speaker the changes have come faster than he can accept, creating tension and a vague anxiety about the future. There is also a real sense of loss.

Beginning in Part Two with “Down Home,” Miller prepares us for the Brier’s sermon by contrasting the old world—its people and values—with the new. He tells us,

. . . He kept meeting feelings like
old schoolmates, faces whose names he'd
forgot. He came on feelings he could
enter again only as a stranger might
a house he'd once lived in; . . . (28)

Again here we have the connection of a house to the self. In *Dialogue With a Dead Man*, the poem “Native Ground” introduced this image in the line “a new house rises” (Dialogue 57). Once the speaker gains his footing on native ground (something he had lost when he lost contact with his shadow-self), he can re-build a new self. Old and new integrated elements of his consciousness are sewn together now. Miller expands this image in the poem “Restoring an Old Farmhouse.” He suggests the idea of being born again here, leading up to the sermon. The persona is drawn back to the weathered farmhouse in Kentucky like “a deer drawn again and again to a saltlick” (Mountains 30). As he begins to renovate the house, removing the weathered boards, he finds that the nails have rusty heads, but a “shank bright as the day it was driven” (30). This newness underneath symbolizes the protection and the salvation in the unique born-again experience that the Brier will urge us toward. As the speaker in the poem removes these old boards, he is:

Dismantling country feelings.

Tearing down, building up again
from what was salvaged.

In that farmhouse, under that low sky in November,
he read of his past like a salt-caked sheet of newsprint
used once to paper a smokehouse shelf. (29)

Then finally, in four lines of images only, the message of the coming Brier’s sermon:

A coming shape, a new room and view,
rose from old flooring.

Two times mingled. Fresh sawdust
spumed yellow as sunlight from old timber. (29)

The next poems—“He Remembers His Mother,” “Bird in the House,” “Set Apart,” “On the Wings of a Dove,” and “Every Leaf a Mirror”—are sensuous and full of images connected with home in the mountains and past feelings. They detail the strain, the pulling apart inside, of a man trying to live in two worlds, summed up in “Every Leaf a Mirror” when he writes:

Every leaf was a mirror he looked in
reflecting his face among smokestacks, billboards,
shopping centers, mills, and vacation cottages
hanging like a mirage along the ridgetops. (36)

The final poem in this section, “Born Again,” is of remembering, not just idle romantic reminiscence, but remembering as a vital part of growth and self-acceptance. To remember is to touch the shadow-self again.

Sometimes a past time sank, silent, into
the ground of his remembering. Searching, he could find
no more than traces, scattered signs, as if
no more remained of that lived time
than a rotten foundation beam, a rusty hinge
dug out of the ground, a bent nail, a plowpoint . . .
His memory lived, died, and lived again
each re-birth restoring him to himself, saying:
you must be born again
and again
and again. (37)

Now we are ready for Part Three, the “Brier Sermon.” Anger and frustration of the Brier’s visions build and build as we find out “How America Came to the Mountains” in a deafening roar of manufactured goods, bulldozers, asphalt highways, and commercials. In other poems, we see the Brier singing ballads, making chairs, and reading about himself in novels. In all these activities he is misunderstood, misrepresented, and stereotyped in a mold that he cannot escape.

So, finally, Miller tells us, “One Friday night, the Brier felt called to preach” (52). The ensuing sermon is a summary, a brilliant synthesis of all the ideas in both *Dialogue With a Dead Man* and *The Mountains Have Come Closer*.

The Brier’s sermon reveals a new awareness for mountain people—an awareness of anger and resentment. This anger is not just directed toward others, but toward himself and his peers in and out of the mountain culture who have shunned their roots so completely. The sermon does not advocate a reactionary romanticism. Miller does not suggest that we can or should turn back the clock. In fact, the Brier directly addresses the

back-to-the-land primitivism embraced by so many young people when he says:

But you don't have to live in the past,
You can't, even if you try
You don't have to talk old fashioned,
dress old fashioned
You don't have to live the way your foreparents lived. (55)

He is talking simply about knowledge and understanding of our past and our family—good and bad. He encourages acceptance of past, present, and future and the integration of all three into the self. He says of the family:

But if you don't know about them
You're not going anywhere. (55)

The shadow-image also makes another appearance in the Brier's sermon when he says:

Forgetfulness of the fathers makes us a people
who hardly cast a shadow against the ground. (56)

At the end of the sermon, the Brier blesses an “invisible crowd on the sidewalk” (64).

Miller dedicates the book to “Jim Brown and Tom Brown and the invisible crowd on the sidewalk” (1). Jim and Tom Brown are referred to in the sermon as educated people who “don't believe in nothing” (52). The sermon, in other words, speaks to both the educated and uneducated who have lost touch with the inner part of themselves, the shadow self where values, beliefs, and the influences of family reside. Miller sees that many have lost touch and cut themselves off from the shadow in a rootlessness that crosses the lines of race, class, and education.

Miller's Brier urges his listeners to get up off their backs; he compares them to boys who are always under cars with just their feet sticking out—“up to your elbows in moving parts / flat on your back always looking up” (57). The Brier wants less passivity among the people and more awareness of their own personal strengths and political power.

You can sit in the smooth upholstered seats of power
and listen to the music playing, (58)

He tells the people that the important thing they've lost is not the physical trappings of a culture, the way of life, but the spirit. By moving off to other places and "... living in dirt / living in filth and trash" (60), we reveal our lack of spirit and our lack of connection.

A spirit keeps its own place clean
like around a fox's den . . .

We've lost the ground from underneath our feet,
lost the spiritual ground.

We've run off and left the best part of ourselves

We've moved to the cities,
moved to town
and left our spirits in the mountains
to live like half-wild dogs around the homeplace. (60)

He also expresses anger at the media, intellectuals, the politicians, the churchmen—all the people who have so shaped and misshaped the Appalachian image for outsiders and for the Appalachian people themselves. The Brier's listeners are urged to pray for a clear vision of themselves, free of self-defeating stereotypes.

When the people have been born again, are able to see and be themselves with the contradictions inherent in that—what happens then? Miller's Brier says:

It's the best of both.
It's being at home everywhere,
It's living in your own house.
It's stepping out your own front door every morning.
It's being old wine in a new bottle. . . .

It's going back to what you were before
without losing what you've since become (63)

After the Brier admonishes the crowd once more to be born again, he finds that it has scattered and he is talking to no one. But he raises a

hand and blesses them anyway. Ironically, he then “disappears behind a motor home” (64), a mobile, transient dwelling. This is the direct imagistic opposite of the old farmhouse that has symbolized the self in earlier poems.

Jim Wayne Miller has created a unique mountain folk character in the Brier, a character for the eighties and beyond. He represents both a voice and a symbol of the new, growing awareness among mountain people that it is time to pause and reflect, time to recognize the causes of some of our problems, time for some pride and self respect. It is time for all of us, individually and collectively, to find our footing on native ground.

Fred Chappell

Though he has an international reputation as a novelist, short story writer, critic, and poet, Fred Chappell keeps close ties to home. A native of North Carolina, he is currently professor of English at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. A list of former students contains a number of distinguished writers, Robert Morgan among them. And Chappell works close to home in his poetry, too. But he is capable of reaching anywhere in the world's literature and tying it to the world in Appalachia. He is, in fact, a modern Dante, a fact astutely discussed by Stephen Marion in an article on *Midquest*, Chappell's tetralogy that earned him the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1985.

With his grandfather a sort of Virgil—a guide to the past one generation removed—Fred travels death in mid-life as Dante did; innocently, he is sent down the icy pit of his imagination, the hollow space of fleshless wonder drilled in the mind by the endless falling away of the present, the tangible, into the spirit void of the past, memory. Poised between two ceaseless journeys—memory, the lost world, and imagination, the unfound world—Fred is afraid he is nowhere, dead.
(29)

Like Jim Wayne Miller, Fred Chappell engages in a dialogue with a dead man: but he is talking to himself. Both men have a vision of Death and live to write about it. They come away with new knowledge and enriched imaginations that continue to feed their poetry. But more important, both come away with a new awareness of the debt they owe to family life and values in their own Appalachian communities. Only there did they find the strength for the journey to darkness and back.

Fred Chappell's first book of poetry, *The World Between the Eyes*, is not a thematically unified collection. The poems deal with a variety of subjects and ideas from children to baseball. Whereas Miller often uses end rhyme and tightly controlled sonnet form, Chappell's poetry can take any form, any shape. His language is bold, even shocking, but always appropriate to his subject.

If any theme predominates at all in *The World Between the Eyes*, it is rebellion. The book is about the young Fred Chappell, who is trying to break out, to express his individuality. Growing up to be the intellectual, the thinking, caring writer is never easy. It is fair to say it can be harder,

due to economic and cultural factors, to do so in the outlands of Appalachia than in some other American setting.

One of the poems, “Tin Roof Blues,” is the description of Canton, North Carolina. It would surely deter anyone thinking of visiting the place. It is a stinking, dirty, noisy mud hole, “an obscure hell” (*World* 37). Chappell writes then, “It’s true I never asked / If a poet was what you wanted, / I never got the chance” (37). After giving us random images of the place and its people, Chappell’s narrator tells us he watched it all “buried in hay in the loft of the barn / and buried in some crazy / book about the stars” (39). His feelings of being different and his search for some freedom from the restrictions of his childhood world are expressed in other poems in this collection also.

In “Land of Cockayne,” “The Father,” “The Mother,” and the title poem “World Between the Eyes,” Chappell addresses the problems of family interaction and rebellion. In “Land of Cockayne,” the speaker is angered by a letter from his mother. As he sits in the house with his wife and daughter nearby, somehow the letter becomes a threat, a bitter reminder of both future and past.

The weather here . . . Grandmother . . . I stuffed it back.
your mind is like an unwashed dish, I think,
Christ! Three generations of a house
Alive, still strangling one another, writing
Letters about the weather. The leaves kick.
I think. Just die and leave me the money. (8)

This feeling of being strangled by family continues in the poems “The Mother” and “The Father,” but there seems to be some sense of acceptance at the end of these poems, a lessening of the bitterness shown in “The Land of Cockayne.”

In “The Father,” the boy is commanded to follow his father to an unknown destination. The father leads the boy to a spring, the source of the family’s water. “Not much a man can do when the source goes bad” (*World* 25). And he says accusingly to the boy, “Doing nothing, you. Roam the hills all day. / Why don’t you find another spring?” (25). The scene then changes abruptly to the boy, holding his father’s razor and looking in the mirror. As he stands there, he describes his father’s boots.

. . . Belligerent
Creases, an armor of mud, curve
of front sole like an unmeaning smile, hooks
Dull in dull light, thick socks
Loll out, sun weary, stained. On the stone
Ledge, boots heavy and impersonal as a command. (26)

Then we come to this statement in italics. “*The sergeants have eyes like knuckles. / Water’s heavy, sir. Wrong. Time of Year*” (26). These are recurring images in this collection. At the beginning of the poem, the father’s eyes were said to be “...eyes like knuckles, like cool joints / of bone” (24). The father then is identified as oppressive, maybe violent. Could this negative image of the father also be tied to the statement “Not much a man can do when the source goes bad” (25)?

After this description of the father’s boots, the boy holds the razor to his wrist, imagining his own death. He finishes his fantasy and puts the razor away, having “...acquired a darkling wisdom, (and) ...the drift of the future” (27). Then the scene changes abruptly again. The boy has led the father to a pool of water. He is sure there is a spring underground; the father is skeptical. He asks:

“How can you know for certain?”
One moment informs every moment, can’t fool
Someone who’s lived through his death, come out grinning,
mind surcharged with the future. (27)

The poem ends with the refrain of a dripping faucet that has figured throughout the poem. “One one now one / now one one one” (27). This is a poem about an awareness of mortality and also a growing sense of self. It is about one’s ability to differentiate himself from parents and acquire that all-important sense of separateness necessary for spiritual and mental growth.

The mother in this childhood world “minces from the room” (28) and “seems to teeter as she goes, waltz / of a drunken fly. She’s all needles, yes” (28). The boy in the poem runs from the house, filled with jealousy over a new baby, and looks back down on it from atop a hill. He plots escape again from his parents and revenge as in “The Father.”

Could live in the woods and eat bugs!
Or, handily build a Snug Cabin, chink it with mud
And trap the animals
. . . He rubs his wrists
Could murder his mother, conquer the world. (30)

But again, the boy sees beyond his fantasy, beyond what is essentially an easy answer. “What’s the future for? / The problem is to acquire a dignity independent of those persons / for whom the dignity is intended” (30). Now the words “dignity” and “independence” have entered his awareness: a threshold has been crossed. There is some small peace, then, in the last stanza.

But when he rumbles out of the hills, going
Home, he bears himself steadfast,
The final temptation borne down ...

He stops to take the measure of the family door
And then he enters. (31)

Taking measure of the family door is something Jim Wayne Miller is also doing in *Dialogue With a Dead Man* as he struggles with the same strong ties of family.

It is the title poem, “The World Between the Eyes,” that deals most effectively with the theme of the struggle for selfhood. The images of past, present, and future self are presented here, and it is this poem that most foreshadows Chappell’s long, self-exploratory work, *Midquest*.

It is interesting to note that the poem is set in October during a visit to his father’s old house, now unoccupied. This image of an old house connected to self-discovery and awareness is found throughout Miller’s work, as was discussed earlier.

The boy wanders the house, remembering the resentment and pain of childhood. In images of militarism, oppression, and warfare contrasted with water there is a continuation of thought from “The Father.” The talk begins again about troops and their lieutenants and the “sergeants have eyes like knuckles” (*World* 11). He is also acutely aware of the present and future, and he can feel them both in the house, too.

It's an old house, his father's house
Foot set upon the floor, a trembling
Advances from joist to joist; it suffers
In patience the agonies of weather
And enclosure. And of time, the time also,
Charged past endurance with the future. (14)

Chappell begins to repeat the military imagery that we by now associate with the father and therefore the past. After this comes a list of the comforts he has—the house holds the comforts of past, present, and future. From his childhood, he has:

old bottles discolored
buckles and heavy buttons
a musty trunk
the spotted mirrors
pages grubby with dust
in mildewed books. (15)

Then, he lists the only kind of comforts that he can imagine for his future. They are fantasies, dream-like images.

Unfinished islands, broken moons,
That ships ply between the suns:
Idols buoy in his head, tactile
And urgent as weather. Outfits himself
For the virgin rivers and the savage traffic.
He yawns. His shadow is empty on the walls. (15)

It is interesting to note the images of the shadow and the old house appearing here together in the same poem, though they are not developed as in Miller's work. The poem ends with the comforts of now.

He's blest in his skins, an old stone
House, and a sky eaten up with stars. (15)

The World Between the Eyes has been disavowed by Chappell himself, who considers it a feeble attempt to write his latest book, *Midquest (Correspondence)*. Like Jim Wayne Miller's early works, *The World Between the Eyes* does seem to contain themes and ideas that are

more fully developed in later writings. Just as *The Mountains Have Come Closer* reflects a continuation of personal and artistic growth and a deepening self-awareness on the part of Miller, *Midquest*, comprised of four previously published books, shows us Fred Chappell's development in thought and philosophy over his first 35 years. In *Midquest*, Fred Chappell evolves into "the poet as Maker [who] wants to create an integrated personal myth, one so local and true every human being immediately becomes aligned with a lost, personal, forever inarticulate history" (Stephenson 26).

The four sections of *Midquest* refer to the four elements: "River," "Bloodfire," "Wind Mountain," and "Earthsleep." Each book contains eleven poems that grow out of the same 24-hour period: the speaker's 35th birthday. His family appears throughout. As Chappell tells the reader in the preface, "Each volume is dominated by a different element of the family: 'River' by the grandparents, 'Bloodfire' by the father; and there is a family reunion in 'Earthsleep,' the part most shadowed by death" (X).

Chappell also asserts in the preface that it is the poems about Virgil Campbell, that "garrulous old gentleman," that gave *Midquest* "its specifically regional, its Appalachian, context" (X). Though Virgil is a strong regional character, he is not the only one. The parents and grandparents are just as identifiable. Their language, their values and beliefs, all place them squarely in Virgil Campbell's neighborhood.

Chappell also tells us in the preface that the persona in the book "... was reared on a farm but has moved to the city; he has deserted manual for intellectual labor, is 'upwardly mobile'; he is cut off from his disappearing cultural traditions but finds them, in remembering, his real values. He is to some extent a demographic sample" (X). To show that a disappearing culture's values are really his own, Chappell must show us these values and the people who hold them. Like Miller, he finds some salvation in his family as he approaches middle age. Holding on to them, not clinging dependently or weakly, but holding on to the part of the past that gave rise to his values becomes important on his 35th birthday. He does not paint a rosy picture; there is pain in his voice. But there are also love and respect. Like Miller, Chappell wants to become aware of and accept the past, present, and future. The intellectual moved to the city

from rural Appalachia must deal with his family. The ties that bind here can pull him backward or at least keep him at a standstill unless he can look positively at the people who made him.

The opening section, dominated by the grandparents, is “River,” where the dominant image is flowing water representing continuity, eternity, and the connection of one place to another. In “My Grandmother Washes Her Feet,” the grandmother sits on the edge of the bathtub, cooling her feet in the water and talking to the boy. She tells him stories about the family—stories that reveal a world of seedy, rowdy characters. She says he needs to know about them, not just the “. . . fine men, brick houses, money . . . Generals, and the damn Civil War, and marriages. Things you brag about in the front of Bibles.” (9) She tells him about the drunkenness, suicide, insanity in the family. The boy has never heard these things.

“O what’s the use,” she said. “Water seeks
Its level. If your daddy thinks that teaching school
In a white shirt makes him a likelier man,
What’s to blame? Leastways, he won’t smother
of mule-farts or have to starve for a pinch
of rainfall.

Nothing new gets started without the old’s
Plowed under, or halfway under. We sprouted from dirt
Though, and it’s with you, and dirt you’ll never forget.” (11)

Like Miller’s Brier, the grandmother is concerned that the boy does not know or understand his past. He is rushing toward middle-class life and work and values as if he has no roots. The grandmother knows that past, present, and future must be acknowledged, absorbed, and most of all, accepted if a person is to be whole.

Second-generation-respectable
Don’t come to any better destiny.
But it’s dirt you rose from, dirt you’ll bury in.
Just about the time you’ll think your blood
is clean, here will come dirt in a natural shape
You never dreamed. It’ll rise up saying, Fred,
Where’s that mule you’re supposed to march behind?

Where's your overalls and roll-your-owns?
Where's your Blue Tick hounds and Domineckers?
Not all the money in the world can wash true-poor
True rich . . . (12)

He says at the end of the poem that he could follow those disreputable “shadow-cousins” (12). As in Miller’s work, the shadow is connected to images and people from the poet’s past. Though it is not a dominant image in *Midquest*, the realization of the shadow-cousins shows a determination to remember, and remembering is an important part of growth for anyone.

The whole section is naturally preoccupied with remembrance because it is about the oldest members of the family. “Dead Soldiers” occurs in 1946, and we meet Virgil Campbell for the first time as he fires his gun into a raging river that floods his store. And we hear stories about the Grandmother’s wedding day and Grandfather’s lapse into the Baptist faith. The persona, “ole Fred,” understands the grandparents and their past lives for the first time. He asks the Grandmother, “But what do you remember?” (35). And she answers him, “Oh, lots of things, / About all an old woman is good for / Is remembering ...” (35). Chappell tells us here essentially the same thing as Jim Wayne Miller’s Brier: that knowing about the lives of our foreparents is important and necessary. There is value for all of us in their collective memory.

The second section, “Bloodfire,” focuses on the boy’s father. He is the first generation of his family to move to the educated, middle-class, professional life. The dominant image of this section is fire; of the four elements, fire is the one representing short intense energy, a fleeting search for life.

The father exhibits many conflicting attitudes toward his home and his past. In “My Father Allergic to Fire,” the Father expresses his shame and disgust at being connected, however loosely, with the Klan while growing up. He seems to be revulsed by the South in general.

Maybe hellfire is good for the South, a kind
of purgative. We could use a lot of that. (62)

“My Father Burns Washington” tells about the time during the Depression when the Father burned some money out of desperation. Moving

from the agrarian Appalachian background to the middle-class was more difficult during this economic crisis. Burning the money is one of his father's continued acts of defiance, as he tries to escape, fights his past, and attempts to rise above it.

In the Virgil Campbell poem in this section, the father and the boy go back to Campbell's store for a visit. Virgil tells a hilarious story about a parade in the town. The local moonshiner, Big Mama, rides her still through town on a float and gets one of the parade mules drunk. The father listens to the story:

“Okay,” my father said, “it’s good to know
The eternal verities still hold their own,
That poverty and whiskey and scratch-ankle farming
Still prop the mountains up . . .”

“Time keeps grumbling on.
Let’s drink us a drink: here at the end of the world.” (80)

There is sadness in those words, but sadness with an edge of bitterness. The life the Father has tried to escape is disappearing anyway. The world of Virgil Campbell still exists in some places, and it is both reassuring and painfully ironic.

“Wind Mountain,” the third section, is not focused on a particular member, Chappell tells us, “in order to suggest the fluid and disordered nature of air” (X). “Second Wind” describes, from the Grandmother’s point of view, the day of the Grandfather’s funeral. The house full of neighbors and relatives smothers her, and she steps out for a walk. It is a stifling, hot day, yet an unexpected breeze comes through the fields where she has worked her life away.

It was the breath of life to me, it was
Renewal of spirit such as I could never
Deny and still name myself a believer.
The way a thing is is the way it is
Because it gets reborn; . . .

The wind that turned the fields had reached the rose
Vine now and crossed the lot and brushed my face.

So fresh I couldn't hear Aunt Tildy's voice,
So strong it poured on me the weight of grace. (106)

This poem is followed by "My Mother Shoots the Breeze," in which the mother admonishes the son not to romanticize the lives of the old ones. Memory is good, so long as it is whole and accurate, not sugar-coated.

. . . What I meant to tell you:
It was hard, hard, hard, hard,
Hard. (109)

This section vacillates as Chappell looks at the good and bad of the changing mountain life. If "River" is about the grandparents and "Bloodfire" about his father, then "Wind Mountain" seems to be essentially about the son as he looks for his place and tries to sort out these different values.

The poem "Remembering Wind Mountain at Sunset" is a long reflection on life in the mountains, and the language and tone remind one of "The Brier Sermon" in places. The narrator stands atop Wind Mountain hearing voices of the past and present. He warns about the loss of heart and spirit among these people just as Miller's Brier does. He sees not only the spiritual danger but also the physical danger, the violence born of poverty and frustration.

. . . I heard
from the valley below
the wearied-to-silence lamentation of busted hands,
busted spines, galled mules and horses, last breeze
rubbing the raw board-edge of the corncrib,
whimper of cold green beans in a cube of fat,
the breathing of clay-colored feet unhooked
from iron brogans . . . (128)

Chappell's persona continues telling us about the hardship of the Appalachian life—the floods, the poor land, the lack of work and hope—through different voices he hears as he stands there on the hill. And again on his 35th birthday, as on every birthday of his life, he has to turn his back on it. He must move on to the life he has chosen for himself.

All this I heard in the stir
of wind-quarrel in Wind Mountain notch,
rich tatters of speech
of poor folk drifting like bright Monarchs.
And then on the breeze a cowbell,
and the kitchen lights went on in the valley
below and a lonesome churchbell
calling
home, home, home, home
till I could bear it no more.
Turned my back.
Walked down the mountain's other side. (133-34)

The final section, “Earthsleep,” is a family reunion. Death recurs as a pervasive theme, and in each poem about each family member earth imagery dominates. “My Mother’s Hard Row to Hoe” is about the hard work of the Mother’s childhood and her determination to escape it through education.

I wouldn’t care if I learned myself to death
at the University in Tennessee
So long as I could tell those fields goodby
Forever, for good and all and finally. (152)

Of course, there were good things. But echoing “My Mother Shoots the Breeze,” she tells us that she would not let those good memories sway her.

There were some things I liked, of course there were:
I walked out in the morning with the air
All sweet and clean and promiseful and heard
A mourning dove— . . . No! I COULDN’T CARE.
You’ve got to understand how it was *hard*. (152)

The father’s attempt to escape the hard life is dramatized in “My Father Washes His Hands.” The father stands washing his hands as he tells the boy about losing the family mule. In order to bury it in the shallow grave, he had to break its legs. The grief he felt at this act made him think it was time to quit.

. . . Heavy is how
I felt, empty-heavy and blue as poison.
So maybe it's time to quit . . . (154)

All the time he continues to wash his hands, trying to remove the clay dirt from his knuckles. He is still trying to break free from the land. But he cannot, not totally. The last lines are:

I handed him the towel. He'd washed his hands
For maybe seven minutes by the clock,
But when he gave it back there was his handprint.
Earth-colored, indelible, on the linen. (155)

The next family member to speak is the Grandmother. "My Grandmother's Dream of Plowing" is one of the most haunting poems in the book. The Grandmother tells the boy about a dream in which her husband's plow uncovers a chunk of gold. Her husband asks her, "Is that your baby that was never mine?" (179). Indeed, the gold turned into a cherubic baby, then a small, demonic goblin; as Frank says, "We're old, ...we're old already, Anne. / And, see, the baby's changed to something else. / It's turned into an ugly little man" (179). The horrified Grandmother wishes it to die, and it does. After its awful, convulsive death, the Grandmother feels terrible remorse.

Perhaps the gold-baby-demon transition symbolizes the changing of the Grandmother's hopes and dreams during her lifetime. The bitterness borne of hard work and many defeats completely kills the dreams and, therefore, the reason for living. To end old and bitter is a sad fate indeed.

In "My Grandfather Dishes the Dirt," the Grandfather chides those who stand around his grave remembering and grieving. He is at peace, he says, and he likes it down there, "Dreaming in cold earth my freshened dream" (181).

Each family member's poem is about letting go of romantic illusions of an idyllic rural Appalachian background. By associating each one with earth/death imagery, Chappell acknowledges the changes that time has brought. He has remembered and integrated their experiences, just as Miller did in *Dialogue With a Dead Man*, and he is ready to move on. The final poem in the book, "Earthsleep," is about never forgetting, about

being reborn, ideas reminiscent of “The Brier Sermon.” It ends on a powerful note of life and love and sun-red morning.

It is the bottomless swoon of never forgetting,
It is the foul well of salvation.
It is the skin of eternity like a coverlet.
It is a tree of fire with tongues of wind.
It is the grandfather lying in earth and the father digging.
The mother aloft in air, the grandmother sighing.
It is the fire that eats the trees of fire.
It is Susan in the hand of sleep a new creature.
I am a new creature born thirty-five years to this earth...

The love that moves the sun and other stars
The love that moves itself in light to loving
Flames up like dew
Here in the earliest morning of the world. (*Midquest* 186-87)

Jeff Daniel Marion

What strikes the reader first about Jeff Daniel Marion's poetry is his uncanny, penetrating observations of the natural world. Rarely are people the principal subjects in his poems. Unlike Miller and Chappell, Marion speaks through nature, letting the cycles of earth and animals and the seasonal rituals speak of larger truths. Ultimately, Marion is always after the big picture, the universal truth found in the detail of everyday life—through a spider web, a shivering hound, or a favorite fishing hole. As Dan Leidig has written:

The sense of local place, the creative force of memory, the presence of story in history, the abiding connections of family, the neighborly character of the small town, the intimacy of the small farm, the irreducible character of country things, the art in ordinary work, and “just plain days gone by”—these are the materials from which Marion’s poems arise (143).

Marion certainly fits Chappell's definition of a folk artist, as his poems are still-lifes of scenes, people, places, even single objects from his past and his present. Note some of the titles from his earlier book, *Out In The Country, Back Home*: “Old Mason Jars,” “Hoe,” “Below Mossy Creek in Mid-August,” “Deserted Barn,” and “Above Newport at the Galloping Sluice.” Compare these titles with some in Jim Wayne Miller's books: “How America Came to the Mountains,” “Born Again,” “Brier Sermon,” and “Brier Visions.” It is easy to see how the political vs. pastoral categorizing starts; even the titles suggest Miller is the more didactic, direct, and political. But there are elements of the political consciousness and the pastoral, quietly contemplative poet-observer in the work of both Miller and Marion, as there are in Chappell and Morgan.

The best introduction to Marion's thought and style may be a poem in his latest book, *Tight Lines*.² In “Crossing Clinch Mountain in February,” the language is rich, almost liturgical, making a statement of purpose for all Marion's poetry. Like Miller and Chappell, he takes us all home by taking the long way around, weaving through fields, hills, and valleys of another place and time that is really here, now, and always.

I take the long road to arrival,
past barns whose weathered gray
sings the fading light.

Fields lying fallow along the way
sow dreams of a small farm
washed in creek-light,
its steady ebb
a tallow of days,

and of those cattle whose hunger
tolls them across hillside trails
to be stabled at last
beneath a dark
vaulted & hushed as cathedrals.

In this dusk
I am your single candle,
faint echo of starlight
on far mountain roads
singing the way
home.

Like Miller, Chappell and Morgan, Jeff Daniel Marion explores the self—the poet’s imagination, understanding, and vision. But Marion does not create characters like Miller’s Brier or Chappell’s Virgil Campbell. The Brier and Virgil are explorations into another soul, mind, imagination, and history in order that we might better understand ourselves. All of Marion’s characters are the same voice essentially, the same persona. Marion is always talking to himself. He can be Matilda, or the farm wife; he is old man Tilley, the voices from Rogersville giving directions, or the Chinese poet beamed down into East Tennessee, but it is still the same voice.

This is not surprising since Marion’s quest is to understand how he and the rest of us fit into the cosmic scheme, the rituals of nature. We are the hub of the great turning wheel. Marion seeks to interpret this interaction, expand upon it. He is an intensely personal poet, but not egocentric at all. It is the sameness and the stillness, the unchanging strength of the voice that captures us and holds our attention. As Frank Steele has written about *Out in the Country, Back Home*:

... the whole book is about the relation between the person . . . and the landscape, leafscape, skyscape, lakescape around him. But at the

deepest level the book is about the growth of imagination—that's not only what the naming signifies and the voice-stillness, but also the metaphorical connectiveness all through. The voice of a poet is nourished by places as if it were a kind of plant. The poems are poems of self-discovery, as well as place discovery: the inside-outside reciprocity of transcendentalism works beautifully here to produce its metabolic rhythms, indications of spiritual growth, inscapes of pure accuracy. (Correspondence)

Marion's poems exist on a plane where experience and imagination are one, fused into a great openness. Gerald Wood calls Marion the poet/priest giving meaning and order (39-45). This is exemplified in a poem in *Tight Lines* called "By the Banks of the Holston," which records old man Tilley's fishing trip down the Holston River. It takes on the importance of a religious holiday with old man Tilley as the pilgrim searching for solace and renewal in the natural world. It is Sunday when old man Tilley boards his skiff in the heavy morning mist. Marion writes of a man who trusts and loves the river as he lets the current carry him away and offers us a hymn of praise to it as joyous celebration of the natural world.

for dark loam of hidden coves,
for the river's shifting eddies and shoals
let there be hosannas,
hosannas forever,
hosannas forever & ever.

"My Grandmother Sifting" is another classic example of Marion's style in that the character in the poem is only part of the image, a sepia-colored memory that holds a larger meaning for Marion. The old blind woman sifts flour, letting it fall across her fingers, savoring the texture of it. Marion relates this act to religious ritual, "alone daily / she / breaks this bread" (*Country* 23). Though she is blind, she enjoys the communion with the world that her other senses allow. Even the simple chore of sifting flour to make bread brings her a great peacefulness very much like what old man Tilley finds on the river.

It is in one of Marion's most beautiful poems, "Ebbing and Flowing Spring," that we see the strong connection of Marion's thought with

Marion

Miller's and Chappell's. The character in this poem is Matilda, her spring and her dipper symbols for another way of life in another time. The poem begins with Matilda dipping water from the spring as she talks about herself and history.

You waited while
Matilda's stories flowed back,
seeds & seasons, names & signs,
almanac of all her days.

...
Moons & years & generations
& now Matilda alone. (*Country* 65)

What's past is gone. But connect with what remains; it's the water that's still here, Marion says. We can continue to satisfy our thirst for elemental knowledge, for connection to something.

Your reach for the dipper
that's gone, then
remember to use your hands
as a cup for the cold
that aches & lingers.
This is what you have come for.
Drink. (65)

The water imagery continues in poem after poem with the flowing spring representing his and his family's past. The idea of water as cleansing and redemptive is suggested. The spring is the baptismal font where the country boy is "born again," as Miller's Brier urges, into a new person with new awareness and respect for his family and cultural heritage. At the spring Marion's narrator "re-discovers" his father, seeing him not only as his parent, but as a part of history, a link to his own inner self. He can listen to the reminiscing of an old man in a new way.

Listening, I settle back
and find the places in his voice:
an old cemetery, its gate rusty,
the air heavy with the incense of cedars.
He names those friends once more.

...

Savoring the tales he tells,
he resurrects them one by one.
They do a strange dance
shaped by his words
and for a moment I believe
I knew them, shared their days. (52)

At the spring, the speaker tells us his father's youth is buried in this place "quiet and forgotten" (52). But echoing the idea of the "Ebbing and Flowing Spring," his father dips his hands in the water, drinks, and is rejuvenated.

He kneels, cups his hands to drink
and believes what he has always told me:
There are some springs that never go dry. (52)

The final poem in *Out in the Country, Back Home* is "Boundaries," a very quiet but firm statement of purpose. Marion means to go his own way, searching for knowledge and an expanded consciousness. Labeling his mission as political or pastoral wastes time. Ultimately, on the same quest as Miller, Chappell, and Morgan, Marion describes the search in the metaphor of walking boundaries on his land.

I'm always at home here
still believing
the reward of this labor
is vision
honed to the blue sharpness
of ridges. (66)

Marion's latest work, *Tight Lines*, is a more mature and complete expression of his poetic gifts. It is a contemplation of the seasons with specific poems for some months of the year and man's rituals enacted during those seasons. It has been said that ritual breeds faith, not the other way around, and Marion's work illustrates this principle. Not only religious ritual, but also the everyday rituals we enact as part of country life enrich the faith, hope, and spirits of those who participate.

A good example of this idea at work is the poem “Recipe.” It describes soapmaking as an important ceremonial event. The speaker begins with the mystical directions, “It must be done by the dark of the March moon.”

The magical ingredients must meet special requirements, also.

Take water from the rain barrels—
snow-melt & late winter rains,
water
too early for mosquitoes, green scum,
& the stagnant ponds of breeding:

. . .
Take hickory ashes from the hearth
sift of long winter nights
by the fire.

. . .
As the steam & bubbles rise
it is time
to add hogskins & cracklins:
memories of mud wallows in summer
& the first hard cold of winter—
hog killing day.

Note that each ingredient must have a very natural connection to the culture, to the rural way of life. This is communion, marking a rite of passage in which Marion’s persona cleanses his spirit and renews himself with a fresh scent from childhood.

with the scrub & sting of this life
you are cleansed to begin
the day.

Here we have the poet/priest, Marion the mystic. Soapmaking is not just some neat, old-timey skill valuable for the self-sufficient lifestyle it represents. As Gerald Wood says, “Even ancient and venerable rituals and images must be restored by the imagination of the poet who wants to achieve authenticity in his own time, not someone else’s” (42). Marion’s imagination imbues the natural cycles and rituals of life in the country with spirituality.

In *Tight Lines* gardening becomes one of the most important rituals of all. In “March” the seeds are carefully planted indoors in order to get good, healthy plants to set out in spring. Marion savors the language of the garden, which is as rich as the soil. Gardens provide the perfect sensory stimulation that feeds the poetic mind, the necessary ritual for the spirit, and the perfect metaphor for the nurturer and seeker of knowledge.

We keep watch
& tend a memory,
turning this local soil in search
of tongue’s delight:

Cushaw & Okra
Hickory Cane & Seneca Chief
Blue Lake,
Honeydew & Muskmelon.

This savor of names
seasons
the waxing and waning
of all our moons until

the earth speaks its own language,
a zodiac of dirt
where we reap
our lives.

In *Tight Lines* the theme of the quest dominates. The journey is one of the soul, a cosmic eye searching the night sky. We wander on the dark plain, and only through connection with seasons and the rituals of seasons can we know our place and keep our sanity. The contrast of light and dark remains constant, as we are urged to be keepers of the flame, holding the light for others to follow.

In “O Light” a hand invades the darkness, reaching for the grain scoop. In “Crossing Clinch Mountain in February,” Marion tells us “I am your single candle,” only a “faint echo of starlight.” But more often, starlight, lanterns or even snow offer the white light that guides the traveler. The poet is the seeker of light. The poems are the bearer. The light comes from homes, the hearth fires, and lanterns. They are earth

stars. In “Late October in East Tennessee” we sympathize with the old hounddog, out there in that cold darkness, searching and waiting for something—an answer, a sense of belonging.

Far beyond him all across the valley
farmlights burn through acres of fog
like stars strung from ridge to ridge
or dusty lanterns hung by the hearth.

Two winter poems offer the richest contrast of light and dark, winter being the bleak season that can extinguish, or at least weaken, the strongest fire. In “Winter Watch” we are trapped by cold and darkness, and rescue is far away.

So begins the trilling of first cold,
crisp October whose blue clarity is
a lullaby to settle the cornshocked field
before winter locks in, setting its
teeth on edge & every eave:
wherever water seeks to run,
the hard cold fact glistens:
here winter nails us in
between hearth & dark
corners where already
our stories grow too dark to tell.

But “Some Morning,” Marion tells us, we will wake to a new vision, a new feeling of winter. Our dreams will make it so; the search for fulfillment and love can continue in a snowflake. This is not syrupy nature poetry, but merely an affirmation of nature’s restorative powers and man’s reliance on them. The speaker in the poem looks out across a field of snow into the eyes of a deer in the dark edge of the woods. Both look out from darkness into light, dreaming of what might be.

Some morning in December
you will wake to a dream
of white: outside your windowsill
each snowflake swirls to silent
caroling. The morning is hushed

as old Sundays, sifting through
acres of memory . . .
You scan the fields beyond
woodshed, past pond, fencerow
to the dark edge of woods.
There, for a moment, the eyes
linger in belief: branches of young
pines bowing to all this white
& a single doe, head lifted, still
getting the scent
of whatever moves darkly beyond,
riding the waves of first snow
past this dream.

The final poem is “Solstice,” meaning literally and figuratively the sun standing still, a pause in the natural flow. Marion is standing still and taking stock: *Tight Lines* is an assimilation of the internal world of imagination and the external world. For him and his reader, the book gives cause to reflect, to ponder our place in the world.

Through “Solstice,” a very short poem, we see all elements of Marion’s viewpoint coming through. The natural world is there; so is man, but not in the flesh, only his spirit—empty shirts hanging on a clothesline. The great ballet of light and dark continues. The stars are in their heaven anyway, and the dark is, finally, not evil, just an interesting contrast. As Gerald Wood has noted, Marion creates for himself a new order. “In this new world, neither nature, friends, nor the town can save the poet from the responsibility for his own imaginative journey, which in Marion’s view is continually nourished by the fertile darkness outside routine living and dull awareness” (45).

Hickory smoke rising
& leaves settling.

The Monday wash hangs
down the line,
shirts billowing out taut,
pulsing.
A sea of sedge grass ripples,
leans to the sun.

Somewhere beyond this drift
stars chart their courses,
Shards of light
buoyed on dark waves.

Marion's collection *Vigils* (in press)³ contains many poems published in earlier books, but added in with the new poems here and rearranged into three sections, they form a clearer picture of his poetic gifts. Marion has found his voice in his vision. In the first two sections of the book, "Making Believe" and "Listening to the Land," memory—sharp and sometimes bittersweet—is the subject and central image. Layer after layer of memory is peeled away—moments to whole lives, places to entire communities—as Marion again goes after the essence of his experience. He returns to the wellhouse, the barn, the creek bank to focus on each particular detail of the scene, so that a single object, such as a hoe, a dipper, or a buckeye, is the key to the door of imagination.

Memory as both the subject and central image is exemplified by "At the Wayside." Returning to an old high school hangout, the speaker in the poem finds new faces, updated decor. He stands for a time, lost in the rush of past moments. He remembers dancers whirling, the spinning records on the jukebox, the overhead fans humming; all these images suggest the wheel of time, the sweet blur that childhood and adolescence often become for us. The mirror behind the cash register reflects the now-lined face which contrasts smartly with the youthful, unfamiliar one behind the counter. The poet flounders momentarily in this sea of reminiscences until the boy behind the counter calls the speaker and reader back to the present. Saying he wants "Just some change," Marion expresses a wistfulness for youth and its simple pleasures in a quietly ironic end to the poem.

In "Letter" we see how Marion ties memory to the natural world, to seasons. He returns to the outdoors for images to express his feelings and ideas. Winter images abound in this poem. "Letter" is a sad meditation on a loved one who is now far away. The good times are connected with summer; there is a remembered meadowlark and fluttering quail, a day of picking blackberries together. The poem moves from now-winter ("Yesterday sleet and blue cold") to past-summer ("... our buckets nearly filled / with July's harvest.") This connection of memory

and seasons continues in other poems. In “Waning,” the subject is coming home, a recurrent theme ringing like a dinner bell in Marion’s work. These words from the poem are particularly revealing: “You learn winter is distance, —a point memory curves its line toward.” Winter and memory are also linked in “Winter Watch.” “Backward toward / a time when / memory is a scar cross / stitching pain to joy, grief to loss.” It seems that winter and memory are inextricably linked in the poet’s mind. Summer is experience—sensory feasting—we live for the moment. But winter is the season of the intellect and spirit, a time to sit back and reflect. Winter is the sorting-out time for memory, the season for waiting.

Patience is a virtue for anyone; it is an essential quality for a poet. The title of this book, *Vigils*, has admirable associations. A vigil requires many of the most desirable human capabilities: patience, devotion, discipline, honor, and faith. The poem “Barsha Buchanon,” which is about a woman keeping a vigil for a man who never returns from a trip to the store, contains a central idea for the whole collection. Her story is an epochal one, honoring a remarkable display of love and endurance.

For 30 years, she waits, laying out supper and clean clothes for him every night. Tending her animals, house, and garden, she never gives up hope: his return is always a possibility.

A lone figure steps out of the woods,
hand uplifted—
a flutter of wings, the quick catch in breath
turns to ache—again the voice betrays:
only a neighbor.

There is a striking similarity between this poem about Barsha Buchanon and Robert Morgan’s poem “Chant Royal” in *At the Edge of the Orchard Country*. In Morgan’s poem about his grandfather, the refrain is “Adequate for survival, withstanding all knocks” (67). Marion’s character keeps a heroic vigil; Morgan’s grandfather is never beaten, not by the weather, bad luck, or illness. Both poems are heroic epics of a common man or woman, using elevated form and language to focus on individuals who showed endurance and perseverance in the face of great trouble and pain. In these poems human spirit triumphs. Morgan and Marion celebrate people whose lives have inspired in them a renewed

Marion

awareness of toughness, of heroism, at a time when our heroes seem to be mainly those who can afford a good agent or a good lawyer.

Jeff Daniel Marion is the voice of civilization on the frontier of his East Tennessee home. There is a wildness, a disarray, that man, with his language, his memory, his simple tools (a hoe, a dipper), his intrusion on the landscape, must confront. Like Robert Morgan, Marion seeks to know what is real; so he keeps an ear to the ground while his eyes search skyward, just beyond the trees.

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Robert Morgan

In a letter to the author, Cornell University Professor Robert Morgan discusses his life and writing, noting:

Appalachia has been called an island of the past, and while that is not entirely true by any means, there is a parallel perhaps between our sense of awakening and the relish of new freedom the New Englanders felt in the 1830s to 50s. There is that emerging from the rapt gloom of fundamentalism into the wide natural daylight. (Correspondence)

Robert Morgan emerges into that wide natural daylight on every page of his 1979 book, *Groundwork*. The book is a journey, moving from high up in the mountains themselves, as Morgan contemplates the natural boundaries that have defined his unique mountain community, to the valley below where the people live and work.

Like Jeff Daniel Marion, Morgan is a clear-eyed, meticulous observer of nature. He constantly seeks to understand how man fits into the scheme of things. The two men are equally attentive to detail and appreciative of natural mysteries. But there is also a marked difference in perspective. Whereas Marion sees man's connection with seasons and the rituals of life and growth, decay and death as positive, even as an anodyne for the pain that is the price of vision, Morgan seems to view nature in a more adversarial role. For him, the value lies in the struggle, as two powerful forces attempt peaceful co-existence. Morgan has written, "I believe in the anarchic and creative soil, and stick to the fringes of society, out where it comes into collision with nature, in the chaotic backwashes and countereddies" (Notes 37).

Marion's world is an elemental order where knowledge, vision, and peace are possible; the darkness that we must acknowledge is "out there" beyond the creek, the woods, the garden. His relationship with the earth and his poetry is fiducial.

For Morgan, the darkness is everywhere: nature embodies chaos, but so does imagination, and reason can give order to both. In "The Transfigured Body: Notes on Poetry from a Journal," he writes:

The marginal and chaotic have promoted more permanence than the institutions of the majority . . . Out of desperation comes the recklessness to get near enough to chaos for some fire, and out of alienation the patience to husband and direct it for the community. (34)

“The Hollow,” the opening poem in *Groundwork*, begins in the marginal, chaotic mountains, explaining why the first settlers stayed there, charmed and transfixed by the beauty of the peaks rising around them. The ridges were “a screen / sent up from the oaks and hickories / to keep them hidden from disease / and god and government, and even time” (1). In “Fear,” Morgan continues describing the people and places who make up his mountain community. In this wild, natural world, superstition reigns, and the natural entwines the supernatural.

A flea circus of dust thrown
up in the yard means
the haints are near
the ghosties roost like cocoons
in the appletree. I’ve seen bones
underground burn like filaments
when passed over by highwires from town,
in torment with
the suffering of the elements.

Everybody knows the waterfall is
haunted by a woman
strangled in her wedding dress back then;
mushrooms are the fingers
of the dead reaching though
and crickets their moving eyes.
Trash around the spring means one
has tried to get back in there. (3)

After a contemplation of the boundaries, the high mountain divides that separate this particular place from everywhere else, Morgan moves down to where the people are. Like Chappell, Morgan is a storyteller. He tells tales that have been told over and over. We sense that these stories are about real people. These are not the mythic, symbolic personages of some of Danny Marion’s poems. Morgan’s people have flesh and bone, and a little less beauty and grace. The flavor of oral tradition abounds; we picture evenings spent re-living these moments of family history.

In Morgan’s first story-poem, a man named Revis and his bride come to their newly built cabin after their wedding to spend their first

night together. Revis has built his cabin on a huge, flat rock, thinking this natural foundation would provide the best possible site for his home. But the rock was already home to a huge nest of rattlesnakes, and the first fire built for his new bride brings them out.⁴

It was she
who wakened to their singing near
the embers and roused him to go look.

Before he reached the fire
more than a dozen struck

and he died yelling her to stay
on the big four-poster.

Her uncle coming up the hollow
with a gift of bearham two days later

found her shivering there
marooned above a pool
of hungry snakes
and the body beginning to swell. (8-9)

There are serpents in this Paradise, and man must always be on guard. Morgan continues his contemplation of snakes in the next poem, “The Flying Snake,” in which the snake takes on mythic proportions and his great-grandpa, the Snake Killer, becomes an epic hero. A giant rattler had killed four settlers and many farm animals. Attempts to stop the cruel killer had failed. Morgan imparts human or super-human characteristics to the rattler, suggesting it always knows when the hunters are coming. Morgan’s great-grandfather finally conquered the snake. He got a brilliant idea of tying his seine net around his team, and he rode out to meet the snake, standing up in the wagon. When the snake made a lunge at him, it got caught in the net and the old man was able to shoot him. The memory of killing the snake became a haunting nightmare for the old man. For the reader the snake is a powerful symbol of the darkness of nature and of the deeper question of how we account for it in God’s world. Morgan leaves us wondering with these last lines.

Years later he’d imagine spiders
falling from the sky like snowflakes,

and mad dogs and angels in storms,
and once in a nightmare he shot
by mistake Jesus as he came
through the east in Rapture light. (11)

In that dark gloom of fundamentalism Morgan mentioned earlier, Jesus and his angels are a mystery in God's plan and arouse the same feelings of dread as spiders, mad dogs, and snakes, the dark sentries of the wild. There is danger in God's world, and Morgan constantly reminds us, not that we might pull away or limit ourselves, but that we might use the knowledge and heightened senses for greater awareness and self-knowledge. J. B. Merod writes:

Despite the pretensions of intellect, wealth, or social position, nature equalizes us all; but Morgan goes beyond that knowledge to instruct us in the uses of disorder and catastrophe. In his view danger comes in many forms. Just as there is threat in privilege, there is also a threat in the status quo, in the weight of entrenched modes of thought and life. Against the inertia of habit, Morgan proposes to go with nature: to ride the waves and rhythms of natural process . . . (57).

Morgan's personal and family history weaves in and out of various poems as he comes to terms with his feelings about his past. Like Chappell, Miller, and Marion, he takes stock, as he approaches mid-life, of who he is and where he and his family have been. There is sometimes a glimmer of resentment for exploitative "outsiders," as in "Plankroad."

Adolescent longing comes to life in "Bean Money" where the young farm boy plots his escape from the hard work and isolation of his mountain farm. After a summer of aching, sweaty labor, the father pays him his share of the season's profits. It is greedily stored away to finance, he hopes, a new life for himself.

That consecrated metal was an abstract
drawn off the soil and sweat and
cast into a jewelry of values.
I meant those struck emblems to act
as compact fuel, like nuclear pellets,
to power my long excursion out of the sun
and beyond the ridges . . .

. . . the young summers
become signs to be translated
again into paper, ink and paper,
in the cool timeless leisure I saw
while washing my feet on the back steps. (31)

But mostly, the talk of the past is gentle, tinged with pathos. “Mountain Page” is a re-evaluation or assessment poem. Here we see the speaker’s understanding and sympathy for those who have gone before. We feel his sadness for the family—its hardships, suffering, unfulfilled dreams. Morgan writes:

My people came from South Carolina by
way of Mountain Page in the last century
and suffered here long enough
to build a church and leave
a dozen graves in the crab orchard.

one wasted years in search of
a secret lead mine the Cherokees
rumored was behind a cliff

...

Another shunned his field to dig for
gold that the millionaires at Flat Rock
must have buried in the Civil War. (47)

Now the narrator sees himself in these lives, sees his own failures and accepts those of his forebears.

And I stop to let their haunt blow
past and dew out in the weeds
while I prospect and dig and bury
expectations: my people
prayed and dug and failed here too. (48)

A dominant theme in *Groundwork* is man vs. nature, particularly the idea of the people in his family and community struggling with the forces of nature. In “Canning Time,” the yearly rite of canning peaches becomes an ordeal, a trial that vexes body and soul. It is almost a battle scene. The canners do not partake in a religious ritual of communion with

nature, as we might see in Jeff Daniel Marion's world. They are women at war, fighting for survival.

In that hell they sealed the quickly browning
flesh in capsules of honey . . . (20)

In "Huckleberries" the suffering necessary to be part of nature is the underlying idea. The poet gathers berries with a friend called F. A., and he fears every buzz and hum. "Never trust the innocent twig in high / berry country; it may be stingworm / snake or walkingstick" (32). As they pick the berries "so few, so tedious to gather" (32), F. A. relates a tale which presents the most terrible image of nature invading the security of home—the darkness snuffing out the light and fire of the heart. A panther steals a baby from a cabin porch. A posse trails the animal to its den where the remains of the infant are found. This tragedy is contemplated as they sweat and ache in the hot sun, gathering their sweet treasure. When they finish, they have paid a price, both in the tale and in the tedium of the labor. "The morning has been said and won, / hands bloody with sweet sun" (33).

Another image that occurs in *Groundwork* is land left barren and useless. Morgan's memories of his childhood North Carolina are not a romanticized vision of lush, green fields and postcard mountain scenes. He remembers in "Milksick Pen" a place where a poison weed grows that will taint the milk of the cow who grazes there. A fence erected around the place allows the forest to flourish untouched by man or animal. And in "Smokehouse Dirt" the salt used to cure meat has created a sterile desert where neither animals, plants, snow, nor light can rest. Man and his appetites have left a scar.

The shadow of the meat-hung roof puddles
sterile as the site of Carthage. Rain will
lick away the savor in about
a century. The light cannot feel at

home on this ground for a while, nor rabbits
warm here at a hearth of vegetation.
The scald won't even
hold a drop of snow, but eats

away the lush crystals fast as heat.
Where the smoked ham sweated and fatback wept
its oils, and molasses cooked
down to plasma in jars, erosion

rubs brine in the wound same as a pissburn
in the pasture. The lye tub drooled its
whey also. Hunger has left a tear
track, recondite among the thickets. (43)

Morgan's persona remembers the hard times and backbreaking work of the farm life, and he is willing to let it go. The farm boy knows too well the stubbornness of mountain land, its reluctance to yield up its bounty. In "Secret Pleasures" he returns to fields he once worked and seems to rejoice in the land that is now being left to nature; the poet enjoys knowing that no one works this field. Though everyone else has had the good sense to abandon it, Robert Morgan, the poet, returns to find a new use for the land.

. . . Let it
scab and fur over on its own
and offer no crop bigger than dew
and the beadwork of berrypicking.
My secret pleasure: to come and watch
these shoots work up
their honey from bitter clay.
Lichen gardens improve the scars,
patching over history. I offer
the land my leisure. (50)

Not all the interaction with nature is portrayed as negative or dangerous, however. One of nature's most destructive elements—fire—becomes for Morgan a life force, a symbol of renewal. Fire fascinates him: this powerful image occurs memorably in "Burnoff," "Baptism of Fire," and "Burning the Hornet's Nest." We are reminded of his statement, "Out of desperation comes the recklessness to get near enough to chaos for some fire" (Notes 32). The fire is the imagination and the human spirit. Morgan has no patience with complacency; the poet must

live and think dangerously. With his poetry, Morgan means to build a little fire under us, like a good Baptist preacher. With this seeking of the light, Morgan is reminiscent of Marion. But his light is the light of a raging fire, as his interest in the scientific gives metaphor to an obsession with fire's power.

In "Burnoff" fire is part of the work at hand, and it is a positive force. The fields are burned in the spring in order to kill the weeds and prepare the ground for planting. He presents and analyzes the event as if it were an experiment, some chemical process, a perspective that is pervasive in *Groundwork*. There is also a spiritual side, though, to the burning of the fields.

As though the conflagration summons
dirt syrup and fire ink out of clay
to irrigate anemic soil
to pave the slope tar-black.
The shadow will need to be turned
like frying ham, sweet with
baked larvae, wormeggs, roots.
We rub the season's minstrel char
on skin, and ask the land to hold its
charge until we plug in seeds. (22)

Fire is not the only metaphorical element in this poem; the work involved is also significant. The value of physical work is a recurring theme in Morgan's poems, as it is in Marion's. These poets remind us of the writings of Simone Weil, the French philosopher who devoted much thought and energy to the contemplation of the relationship of work to the human soul. She believed that work and thought must combine to produce wholeness in society and the individual, writing: "If the whole spiritual life of the soul . . . and all the scientific knowledge acquired concerning the material universe are made to converge upon the act of work, work occupies its rightful place. . . it becomes a point of contact between this world and the world beyond" (32).

Preparing the field for planting becomes a point of contact with the world of the spirit through fire, literally and metaphorically, as the fire embraces the spirit seeking knowledge, wholeness, vision. The burning

field offers its own revelation to the poet/seer/scientist. It connects with an image in the poem about the burning hornet's nest that Morgan describes as a great burning eyeball (41). As Stephen Marion says in his essay: "Fire sweeps life, death, and decomposition together in one swift vision... A certain essence, a signal, is revealed, as if the fire threw vision as it throws light" (25).

That is why Gondan, the preaching fieldhand in "Baptism of Fire," argues with the conventional notion of water, symbol for the blood of Christ, as the only element with redemptive powers. Gondan says:

The Word says it takes the Baptism of Fire
to see the Kingdom . . .
Anyone that ain't rubbed clean by
purifying flame better get his asbestos suit. (28-29)

Morgan's image of fire dovetails with Fred Chappell's here, as we remember the poem "Bloodfire" when the father says, "Maybe hellfire is good for the South, a kind / of purgative. We could use a lot of that" (Midquest 62). The key word is purgative because Morgan and Chappell share the idea of redemption made possible by fire. All of us need to feel the fire occasionally to shock us out of our smugness, our laziness, our vulnerability to self-importance. For Morgan and Chappell, nature's most violent element, fire, seems to offer more power to change and renew than its quieter sister, water.

Groundwork is no lament of the horrors inherent in the natural world or even the hell of burning imagination in the mind of a North Carolina farm boy. Morgan is not complaining. The voice is admiring, seeking understanding, questioning the source, and cataloging the mysteries of the scientific world. Morgan is the scientist/poet in the tradition of Henry David Thoreau or, more recently, Loren Eisley. As Stephen Marion has observed:

For Morgan, science is a sense of new ground. He watches natural reactions and cycles and introduces human senses to form an experiment, a poem, to reveal the essential properties of all the elements involved. The poem is a field laboratory, where measurements are done by hand and eye. It is a place where the senses of nature are

given life to react with the senses of man to produce a glow that is essence (27).

Robert Morgan's latest effort, *At the Edge of the Orchard Country*, from Wesleyan University Press, is an even more developed expression of many themes and motifs found in *Groundwork*. In this book Morgan draws on memory, family stories, and local history of his North Carolina home, bringing grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins to life in poem after poem, "recovering pieces of the morgenland" in a very thorough fashion (68).

The book opens with a poem about Horace Kephart working in his tent on a chapter of *Our Southern Highlanders*, writing he does as repayment to his parents for all the years of college and all the blessings life afforded him. The poem and its theme of indebtedness become a metaphor for Robert Morgan and *At the Edge of the Orchard Country*—a repayment of a debt to the people and places who made him. Every poem in the first section is a broken twig on the twisted path of Morgan's memory of his childhood and family. "Passenger Pigeons" and "Buffalo Trace" are about homing in and finding direction. The sleeper in "Feather Bed" dreams and drifts across space, time, years "Across the troubled Atlantic and centuries/toward a white immaculate garden" (7). Thomas Wolfe feverishly writing in his Brooklyn apartment is juxtaposed with a moonshiner back home in "Looking Homeward," directing our attention to the final poems in the section. "Halley's Comet" and "White Autumn" feature women in the family album whose words and lives informed Morgan's own. Indebtedness becomes the dominant theme of the entire first section, gratefulness for having "yet another spring he'd been / privileged to remember . . ." (12).

One important image from *Groundwork*, fire, and one important idea, the value of physical work, continue in *At the Edge of the Orchard Country*. Fire, heat, and light provide the central image in poem after poem. The burning intensity of a creative genius like Thomas Wolfe is held up beside the moonshiner's fire in "Looking Homeward." A comet, a swirling bomb of gases jetting though the night sky, is "a kind of promise of the continuance / of things in a broken world —" (12). In "Manure Pile" and "Dead Dog on the Highway," the heat of fermentation

is the focus. From the tiniest light of all, the lightning bug, to the emotional heat of a “hot and vivid” (29) revival in a country church, fire of any kind is important to Morgan, suggesting the possibility of renewal, promise, and positive energy. In “Nail Bag” we learn of the pioneer practice of burning a barn down for the nails. This was necessary in order to move on to new, more fertile land. The settlers would arrive with their reclaimed nails, burn the logs that were cleared from the new claim, scatter the ashes and reap a bountiful harvest. Fire again brought a new beginning, a place for another generation.

As though all husbandry and home
were carried in that charred handful
of iron stitches, blacksmithed chromosomes
that link distant generations. (61)

As in the work of the three poets previously discussed, the value of physical work is a predominant idea in Morgan’s book. In the world of the farm, people do not sit idle, or worse, in front of the television. They do not have time for aerobics, jogging, or analysts. There is much to do, and the people Morgan brings to life for us are busy. They rake, sweep, plow, plant, clean off the cemetery, tend their land and animals. Even a little boy like the young Robert Morgan could not spend too much time dawdling. He says, “I had other lives also, and work to do” (41).

In “Harrow” the work of plowing takes on cosmic importance, as the finished new ground is “the planet’s newest field” (38). And in “Field Theory” work as a preserver of sanity and innocence is the underlying idea.

I like to think they found in work
soil subliminal and sublime,
Their best conspiracies were two
breathing in the night . . . (68)

The second section of the book focuses on nature’s sights, sounds, and smells—from manure to spring flowers, lightning bugs, the air itself—then the poet moves us easily, quietly into childhood memories of church services, hiding in potato holes, visits with relatives, a boy’s first attempt to plow. Morgan is mining his memories for insights into his character,

the whys of his own journey through life. There is the same exciting mix of scientific knowledge and terminology in the poetry that we saw in *Groundwork*. These lines from the poem “Brownian Motion” offer an example.

The air is an aquarium where
every mote spins wild
and prisms the morning light.
Lint climbs sparkling on
convection’s fountain,
and magnetic storms boil away
like gnats bumped by molecules.
Every breath swarms
the clear spores, ions seethe,
magnified in playful flight. (23)

Section three, the last, is a continued regression into the past, beyond Morgan’s personal memories, to a historical tracing of a more cultural memory, and his indebtedness to the collective experience of his forefathers and mothers. These poems chronicle the life of the early pioneers, with descriptions of how the early settlements were set up, how land use was parcelled out, and what role the Indians played in the past of the Appalachian mountains.

Showing his mastery of complex poetic forms, Morgan writes about his grandfather using a very difficult old French form, the “Chant Royal.” The technically formidable form requires five stanzas of 11 lines each, followed by an envoi. Each section ends with a refrain. Morgan’s “Chant Royal” is a hymn of praise and a prayer, a fitting close to any ceremony—hence its position as the next-to-last poem in the book. The poem recounts the life of Morgan’s grandfather, born weak and fragile. Only determination on the part of his mother kept him alive. Her strength not only saved him but also prepared him for a hard life. When the grandfather was finally able to buy a piece of land of his own, Morgan tells us “he sank a well through rock-weathered debt depression, set groves, / Adequate for survival notwithstanding all knocks” (67). This last line becomes an underlying theme for the entire collection, as the envoi enlists the help of higher powers in living a life of integrity.

Guardian ghost inhere herein before Jove
may this music honor his example improve
my time as he invested his and no less unorthodox
discover significance in the bonds his fate wove
adequate for survival, notwithstanding all knocks. (67)

Memory. History. Imagination. Science. These are the subjects of *At the Edge of the Orchard Country*, the entire collection a fermentation of Morgan's complex system of interests. Like the other poets discussed here, Morgan acknowledges and honors memory's place in literature. But his distinction lies in his successful blending of science and poetry. He may be the answer to I. A. Richards's ideal, discussed in his famous essay "Science and Poetry," in a book by the same name, published in 1926. As Richards pointed out, science alone can only tell us how things behave, how the universe exists and operates; it cannot tell us why. Science cannot tell us what we are, what the world is. That is the poet's job. Survival in the modern scientific world requires that the scientists and poets not turn away from each other, but instead become more alike.

In a letter to the author, Robert Morgan has written, "In my own case I feel equally moved by the old hymns at baptizing and quantum mechanics" (Correspondence). That might serve as a motto for him in one sentence. His sense of adventure, his desire for order and understanding, and his quest for vision are equally satisfied in poetry and science.

Conclusion

Imagine a linear diagram with three segments. On the left is civilization; a small area in the middle represents the frontier, where civilization and nature meet and mingle; to the far right is nature. All four poets have roots in the frontier experience. Chappell and Miller stand looking over civilization: its systems, politics, history, psychology, culture, and mythology, and how they fit into it. They have been to town and are trying to make sense of what they see, put themselves and their mountain families and culture into perspective. Jeff Daniel Marion and Robert Morgan look to the wildness of nature for answers. Marion examines that mingling of civilization and nature on his own personal frontier to see how he, with his simple tools and his sharp eye, can create some order for himself. Morgan, the modern Thoreau, immerses himself in that great whirling chaos of nature, rejoicing in its raw power, its beauty and its truth.

The scope, importance, and durability of the current effusion of poetry from the Appalachian region remain to be seen. But one thing is certain: Fred Chappell, Jim Wayne Miller, Danny Marion, and Robert Morgan are at the center of it. As their work has been distributed and studied over the past decade, they have been gaining recognition as harbingers of a grassroots literary movement.⁵

Some have been tempted initially to dismiss any notion of a new Appalachian branch on the American literary tree, seeing it only as an afterthought of the Southern Renaissance that occurred in the 1940s. There is a grain of truth in that assertion.

Like the Fugitives, Chappell, Marion, Miller, and Morgan probably never lost any sleep trying to write a poem for *The New Yorker*. They are seeking their own voice and style in a language flavored with mountain sounds. Being regional to them does not mean being limited. As George Ella Lyon has written:

This is not to say a writer has only one voice or is limited to the scope of her backyard. But in some sense her work must begin there, at the rootwad. And wherever she travels she must take that place with her, must feel in the dark of memory for its shape. If not, her work will

be the literary equivalent of Walter Cronkite's accent: literature from nowhere. (*Literature* 4)

The cultural experience that spawned these four poets does have something in common with that of the generation of Southern writers that came before. The Deep South earlier in the century and the Southern Appalachian mountains even today represent rural areas with distinct cultural traditions and values that have experienced rapid industrialization and commercialization. Today's Appalachian poets, like the Vanderbilt Fugitives of forty years ago, are writing about the "crossing of the ways," as Allen Tate called it. "It has made possible the curious burst of intelligence, . . . not unlike, on an infinitesimal scale, the outburst of poetic genius at the end of the sixteenth century when commercial England had already begun to crush feudal England" (Profession 768).

P. J. Laska is right in saying that these Appalachian poets write of ordinary people's lives, work, struggles, and history. They are definitely "closer to a regional folk conception of art" (195). They are nourished and stimulated by their academic experiences, past and present, while writing mostly of and for the common man. All four poets return to elemental images again and again. Chappell's *Midquest* is organized around the four elements; Morgan relies on fire as a central image in *Groundwork*. Marion returns to water—the river, creek and spring—throughout his poems. Jim Wayne Miller writes with dirt-stained hands and an easy familiarity about working the land. Even though they now spend their days in the clean, academic world of students, books, and papers, the spring feeding their imaginations comes from a world outside that sphere, the world of memory and the natural world. Their motivation for writing is the individual search for understanding, values, a way of living in a changing world where they will always be different. Though Chappell, Marion, Miller, and Morgan are acquainted and are very thoughtful readers of each other's work, they do not work as a group. Unlike the Fugitives, these poets have no sweeping upheaval of the literary establishment on the agenda.

In response to the poetic energy unleashed by these four and many others, several small magazines and presses have emerged in the area, dozens of new books have been published by regional writers, and many

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writer's workshops and public readings are regularly scheduled around the region. Several anthologies, as well as collections designated for the high school and college classroom, are in press. *Common Ground: Contemporary Appalachian Poetry*, as yet unpublished, and *A Southern Appalachian Reader* from Appalachian Consortium Press, two notable examples, should bring new readers and critical attention to the region's writers.

Though the focus of this book has been on men only, it must be noted that the Appalachian writers publishing currently seem to include mostly women poets. George Ella Lyon, Jane Wilson Joyce, Bettie Sellers, Maggie Anderson, Bennie Lee Sinclair, Pat Shirley, Lee Howard, Kathryn Stripling Byer, Rita Quillen, and Jo Carson join well-known prose writers such as Lee Smith, Lisa Alther, Lou Crabtree, and Wilma Dykeman to write about the changing times in their Appalachian communities. Fred Waage, former editor of *Now and Then*, may be right in observing, "The conjunction of persisting skills and changing roles has given Appalachian women—more, perhaps than men—a position at the flash point of transformation in our culture" (2). It is certain that they are vitally interested in that transformation and how it affects them personally. These women question their own values and purpose in order that they might help themselves and the next generation have a clearer self-image and understanding of history.

Kate Byer's *The Young Girl in from the Harvest*, Jane Wilson Joyce's *Quilt Poems*, and *Mountain* by George Ella Lyon, for example, all involve extensive use of memories from childhood and family stories. Like Chappell, Marion, Miller, and Morgan, these women are now college teachers, no longer living in the communities where they grew up. But it is those communities and the family and friends they have there that provide the stuff of poetry. Of course, these women writers often find different metaphors from those of the men; the elemental world that a woman returns to is more likely to be indoors. So in their poems involving elemental images, the water will be in the "Kitchen Sink," as in Kate Byer's poem. The fire is in the cookstove, the air is in the baby's breath. The work is quilting, canning, cleaning, taking care of others. But the result is the same.

Memory sets the boundaries, provides a starting point for the chronicle of a life and its meaning. We are defined by our work and nourished by it. Whether the writer is a man or a woman, the story of the changing world of Appalachia begins with the childhood of these contemporary observers, who have seen the work and therefore the very nature of day-to-day life change drastically.

Fred Chappell, Jeff Daniel Marion, Jim Wayne Miller, and Robert Morgan help lead the way in a quest for knowledge, holding the light for others to follow. They have accepted the family influence and experience in their present lives. This new awareness gives them a vision of the future. By recounting their own lives and family histories, they are in fact telling the story of all the people in the Appalachian region. They fit P. J. Laska's definition of the folk poet in that their poems are about a particular people, place, and time. And their work reminds us of Emerson's concept of the poet when he says, ". . . the poet is representative. He stands among partial men for the complete man and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth" (11). These four poets, and others sharing their interests, make us aware of the common wealth we share as a part of the mountain culture. Appalachia is on the threshold of change; the past is gone. We cannot hold on to it. But feeling love and respect for our family and the land itself is not romantic provincialism. An examination of our cultural past can bring a positive assimilation of our many selves, our many shadows. We can be reborn in a new form but still on native ground.

Notes

1. A most insightful analysis of the Fugitive poets, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren, and their philosophy is Louis D. Rubin's *The Wary Fugitives: Four Poets and the South* published by Louisiana State University Press. Rubin points out that the Agrarian's primary agenda was to promote a return to humane values and encourage the affirmation of the individual in modern technological society. The sense of place and awareness of memory that is central to Appalachian poetry represents a similar philosophical viewpoint.
2. There are no page numbers in *Tight Lines*, so quoted lines are identified in the text by mention of the name of the poem.
3. Quoted lines in *Vigils*, to be published in 1989 by the Appalachian Consortium Press, are identified by the name of the poem in the text.
4. This story is also told as part of John Ehle's novel *The Landbreakers*, a fact that Robert Morgan was surprised to learn. He told an audience at the Hindman Settlement School in 1987 that he heard that story growing up and believed it to be true. It was only a few years ago that he learned about the scene in the novel and realized the story was a "tale."
5. See the bibliography of contemporary Appalachian poetry in *Appalachian Journal* 13.1 (Fall 1985): 51-77, and a listing of both magazines and workshops in *Now and Then* 4:2 (Summer 1987) for further information about Appalachia's literary scene.

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